# Weeping in Classical Sufism

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Weeping is mentioned in a positive light in the Qur'ān, the Ḥadīth, and much of Islamic literature. Anyone who has attended a session of Qur'ān recitation can attest that it is not only an accepted but even an expected phenomenon in Muslim praxis. But what exactly is its significance? If we want answers provided by Muslims, the best place to look is in the writings of the Sufis, who have played the role of depth psychologists and spiritual therapists for most of Islamic history. Two other major schools of thought—jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and dogmatic theology (*Kalām*)—have little to say about the inner workings of the soul. As for the Hellenophile philosophers, they aimed at transmuting the soul into pure intelligence and acquiring virtue, but they rarely discussed phenomena associated specifically with religious practice.

## The Qur'ān and Ḥadīth

The Qur'ān mentions "weeping" (*bukā'* and derivatives) in seven verses and "tears" (*dam'*) in two more, and these verses become points of reference for much of the later discussion. The revealed book praises weeping in connection with the recitation of its own verses: "When the Qur'ān is recited to those who were given knowledge before it . . . , they fall down on their faces weeping, and it increases them in humility" (17:109). A ḥadīth instructs the believers to weep while they recite the Qur'ān, or at least to try to weep (*tabākā*).[1] Many ḥadīths speak of the Prophet's own weeping. One tells us that he was reciting the prayers of Abraham (Qur'ān 14:36–37) and Jesus (5:118) for their respective communities. Then he lifted up his hands in supplication and said, "O God, my community, my community!" and he wept. God revealed to him that he would not be disappointed.[2] Another ḥadīth tells us that he wept upon visiting the grave of his mother.[3] Still another says that when his infant son Ibrāhīm died, he wept, and one of his companions said to him, "You too, O Messenger of God?" He replied that he was moved by mercy (*raḥma*). Then he said, "The eye sheds tears and the heart grieves, and we say only what pleases our Lord. O Ibrāhīm, we are grieved at parting from you!"[4]

Once when the Prophet was passing through a village, he saw a woman cooking bread in an open fire and holding her child on her hip. When flames



shot up, she quickly jumped back. Later she came forward and said, "Is not God 'the most merciful of the merciful' [Qur'ān 7:151]." The Prophet replied that he was. She said, "A mother would never throw her child into the fire." The Prophet bowed his head and wept. Then he said, "God does not chastise any of His servants but the defiant and recalcitrant, those who defy God and refuse to say, 'There is no god but God.'"[5]

The ḥadīth literature often ascribes weeping to Abū Bakr, the Prophet's close companion and the first caliph. The sayings are summed up in the remark of one of the other companions: "Abū Bakr was a man who wept much [*bakkā'*]—he had no control over his eyes."[6] He seems to be the prototype for the occasional ascetic in later literature to whom is applied the attribute *bakkā'*. Despite the opinion of some of the Orientalists, however, there is no evidence that there was a group of people known by this label.[7]

Although weeping is generally praised, some authors view it as a sign of immaturity, and Abū Bakr is also cited as someone who passed beyond the stage of weeping. In explaining the meaning of the Qur'ānic verse, "Then your hearts became hardened after that, so they are like stones, or even harder" (2:74), an eleventh-century commentator tells us that there are two sorts of hardening. In the case of the ignorant, hardening means unkindness, cruelty, and distance from God. In the case of those who are pure and knowledgeable, hardening is firmness in knowledge and purity. Then he cites Abū Bakr: When he would see people weeping as they listened to the Qur'ān, he used to say, "I was like that until 'hearts became hardened.'"[8]

Given the dialectical structure of Qur'ānic rhetoric and Islamic thinking in general, one can hardly speak of weeping without mentioning laughter (*ḍiḥk*).[9] The Qur'ān suggests that the two need to be understood as one of the many cosmic pairs: "Surely it is He who makes to laugh and makes to weep, it is He who makes to die and makes to live, it is He who created the two kinds, male and female" (53:43–45). That there is something archetypal about laughter and weeping is indicated in a ḥadīth about the Prophet's ascent to God (*mi'rāj*). When he reached the first heaven, he saw Adam sitting with two large groups of people, one on each side. When Adam looked to his right, he would laugh, and when he looked to his left, he would weep.[10] The Qur'ān places "the companions of the right hand" (56:38) in paradise and "the companions of the left hand" (56:41) in hell.

The later tradition is generally critical of laughter. This is partly because the Qur'ān ascribes it and related phenomena—such as "mockery" (*istihzā'*) and "derision" (*sukhriyya*)—to the unbelievers in their dealings with the believers. It tells the unbelievers that in fact they should be weeping: "Do you wonder at this talk? Do you laugh and not weep?" (53:59–60). A frequently cited ḥadīth makes a similar point: "Were you to know what I know, you would laugh little and weep much."[11] The Prophet also said, "Avoid much laughter, for much laughter deadens the heart."[12] Although I have not seen it mentioned, the

corollary seems obvious: "Weep much, for much weeping enlivens the heart." Despite the praise of tears throughout the literature, however, the ḥadīths attribute laughter to the Prophet far more often than weeping.

If the Qur'ān makes clear that weeping is an appropriate attribute of believers in this world, it also says that laughter will be their attribute in the next world: "The believers will be laughing at the unbelievers" (83:34). It associates laughter with the experience of the beatific vision: "Some faces on that day shall shine, laughing, joyous; some faces on that day shall be dusty, overspread with grime" (80:38–41). Even more interesting, the ḥadīth literature tells us that God laughs. According to one report, God laughs at the despondency of someone whose fortune is about to change. When asked if God really laughs, the Prophet replied that he does, and a companion remarked, "We will lack no good from a Lord who laughs."[13]

Another ḥadīth tells us that after the resurrection, a certain person will keep on pleading with God not to throw him into hell, and God will agree on the condition that he not ask for anything more. The man breaks his promise, and God moves him closer to paradise, again extracting the promise that he will not ask for more. This happens several times. Finally, God laughs and places him in paradise. In one of the several versions of this ḥadīth, the narrator, Ibn Masʿūd, concludes it like this:

> The man will say, "Are You making fun of me, and You are the Lord of the worlds?"
>
> Then Ibn Masʿūd laughed. He said, "Will you not ask me why I laughed?"
>
> They said, "Why?"
>
> He said, "God's Messenger laughed like this, and they asked him, 'Why do you laugh, O Messenger of God?'
>
> "He answered, 'Because of the laughter of the Lord of the worlds when he said, "Are you making fun of me, and You are the Lord of the worlds?"'"[14]

Another ḥadīth tells us that the prophets and their communities will be waiting for God to appear on the Day of Resurrection. When God reaches Muḥammad's community, he will ask them why they are standing there, and they will say that they are waiting for their Lord. He will tell them that he is their Lord, and they will ask him to show himself. "Then He will disclose Himself to them laughing."[15]

## Early Sufism

When the early Sufi teachers mention weeping, one of their first concerns is to classify its causes. Qur'ān 5:87 speaks of people weeping as the result of the "recognition" (*maʿrifa*) of the truth (*ḥaqq*) of the recited Qur'ān: "When they



hear what has been sent down upon the Messenger, you see that their eyes overflow with tears because of the truth that they recognize" (5:83). In commenting on this verse, Ibn ʿAṭā (d. 922) adds four other positive qualities of the soul that may cause weeping: joy, regret, fear, and burning (*ḥurqa*), the last of which is the agony of being separate from the Beloved.[16] The Sufi manuals mention weeping but rarely give it a separate discussion. One exception is provided by *Kitāb al-lumaʿ* (The book of flashes) by Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 988). In a miscellany toward the end of the book, he cites weeping as a significant topic and quotes the words of Abū Saʿīd al-Kharrāz (d. 899), who divides weeping into eighteen sorts according to three categories: from God, toward God, and over God. Weeping from God is fear of God's chastisement and grief at being kept apart from him. Weeping toward God is the yearning of lovers to meet their Beloved. Weeping over God results from separation after arrival or from "weeping in joy at the arrival at Him, when He embraces [the seeker] in kindness like a suckling child nursing at the breast of its mother."[17]

As the Sufi authors began to put together more systematic works, one of their favorite genres was description of the stages of spiritual growth. They offered diverse schemes describing the "stations" (*maqāmāt, manāzil*) on the path to God, typically enumerating them in terms of archetypal numbers—seven, ten, twelve, forty, one hundred. Rarely do they single out weeping as a specific stage, though it often comes up in passing. Only when we look at some of the more complex meditations on the stations does weeping enter into the title headings. In *Mashrab al-arwāḥ* (The drinking places of the spirits) Rūzbihān Baqlī (d. 1209) describes 1,001 stations in twenty categories of fifty stations each, capped by the realization of full perfection. Five of the stations are named after weeping: weeping, the drying up of weeping, weeping from the Real for the Real, weeping in laughter, and weeping in ecstasy. "Weeping," Rūzbihān tells us, "takes place in over a thousand stations," and this may suggest why it is rarely singled out for a separate discussion.[18]

Al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), always an insightful analyst of praxis, has no separate discussion of weeping in the longest and most influential of his fifty books, *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* (Giving life to the sciences of the religion). He gives the topic some attention, however, in the third section of its fourth and last part, which is dedicated to fear (*khawf*) and hope (*rajāʾ*). These two are often mentioned in the Qur'ān and are frequently discussed in the Sufi manuals. Although he cites one of the early Sufis to the effect that fear and hope are the two wings of the soul in its flight to God, he devotes most of the chapter to fear. In doing so, he mentions many examples of weeping by the Prophet, his companions, and the pious. He tells us that those who fear God's justice, severity, and wrath will find it easy to perform the ritual obligations and to obey the revealed law. "Fear is that which encourages good deeds, dulls the appetites, and discourages the heart from depending on this world."[19] His explanation of why he does not stress hope throws light on the whole tradition:

> It is best to let fear dominate over hope—only, however, until the imminent approach of death. At the time of death, it is best to let hope and a good opinion of God predominate, for fear plays the role of a whip encouraging activity, and now the time for activity has passed. The person near death is not able to act and he cannot endure the causes of fear, for they would break his heart and hurry his death. As for the spirit of hope, that will strengthen his heart and make him love his Lord, in whom he hopes. No one should depart this world without loving God and loving to encounter Him. For, [as the Prophet said,] "When someone loves to encounter God, God loves to encounter him." Love is linked to hope, for when someone hopes for something from someone, he considers him beloved. And the goal in all knowledge and all practice is to recognize God, so that recognition may give rise to love.[20]

The most influential theoretician of Sufism, Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 638/1240), has relatively little to say about weeping in his enormous compendium, *al-Futūḥat al-makkiyya* (The Meccan openings). He devotes only one of its 560 chapters specifically to the topic. In fact, however, the short chapter 313, "On the knowledge of the station of weeping and wailing," focuses on the role of the prophets in their communities and touches only briefly on weeping itself. He tells us that the prophets have achieved the station of perfect servanthood (*ʿubūdiyya*), which demands being empty of self and full of the divine presence. God, however, has made them his representatives, so they must make manifest the attributes of lordship (*rubūbiyya*) and divine authority. Making God's attributes manifest introduces a certain duality into their relationship with him, for in effect they are setting themselves up as minor gods. Outwardly they display lordship and remain far from God, but inwardly they remain his servants and stay near to him. They weep because of wariness (*taqwā*) and caution (*ḥadhar*), for they fear not giving the station of religious obligation (*taklīf*) its rightful due. In support of this interpretation, Ibn al-ʿArabī cites Muḥammad's saying, "I am more wary of God than any of you, and I have the most knowledge."[21] He rightly points out that the Prophet said this after his companions remarked on his extraordinary exertion in acts of worship, even though this Qur'ānic verse had already come down: "Surely We have given thee [O Muḥammad] a clear victory, that God may forgive thee thy former and thy latter sins" (48:2).[22]

Elsewhere in the *Futūḥāt*, Ibn al-ʿArabī comments on the verse, "These are they whom God has blessed among the prophets. . . . When the signs of the All-merciful were recited to them, they fell down prostrate, weeping" (19:58). In this case, he says, the prophets wept in joy, for the signs of the "All-merciful" reached them. "Mercy does not demand severity and magnificence, but gentleness and tenderness."[23]

Several times Ibn al-ʿArabī comments on a saying of Abū Yazīd Basṭāmī (d. ca. 874): "I laughed for a time, I wept for a time, and now I neither laugh nor weep." Generally, he understands this as reference to Abū Yazīd's having reached "the station of no station," the level of spiritual perfection in which the divine image has been fully actualized and absolute servanthood has been achieved.[24] In one passage, he invokes the saying in a legal discussion: If someone laughs while performing the ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*), does this invalidate the prayer? Most jurists hold that it does. Ibn al-ʿArabī says that it depends on the state of the person. If the person is heedless of God, then laughter will invalidate the prayer. But if the person is receptive to the self-disclosure (*tajallī*) of God within the Qur'ānic verses that he is reciting, laughter will simply display the appropriate response. This is why Abū Yazīd, who had been completely overcome by the Qur'ān, would sometimes laugh and sometimes weep.



> During the Qur'ān recitation in the *ṣalāt*, the states of people with God are diverse—if they are among the folk of God, those who ponder the Qur'ān. One verse makes them sad, so they weep; another verse makes them happy, so they laugh; still another verse astonishes them, so they neither laugh nor weep. One verse bestows a knowledge, another verse makes them ask forgiveness and engage in supplication.[25]

In still another passage, Ibn al-ʿArabī confirms that God's self-disclosure determines whether a saint will laugh or weep. He mentions as examples two men whom he has met, though he makes clear, both here and elsewhere, that such people are rare.

> There is a self-disclosure that makes to laugh. I have never seen anyone in this path who was among the folk of laughter except for one man, who was called ʿAlī al-Salāwī. I journeyed with him and was his companion in both travel and town in Andalusia. He never ceased laughing, like someone enraptured who comes to his senses only occasionally. I never saw him say anything sinful. As for the weepers, I have seen only one of them: Yūsuf al-Mughāwir al-Jallā in the year 586 [1190 A.D.] in Seville. He accompanied us and was showing his states to us. He was in great anguish, and his weeping never lapsed. I was his companion when I was also the companion of the laugher.[26]

## Theological Implications

Islamic theological thinking in its diverse forms begins by unpacking *tawḥīd*, the declaration of divine unity that is the first principle of faith and is expressed most succinctly in the formula, "There is no god but God." This means, in brief, that nothing is true and real but that which is truly real (*al-ḥaqq*). Everything derives from the Real and returns to the Real, and tears are no exception. It is typical of Qur'ānic rhetoric to make this explicit—"It is He who makes to laugh and makes to weep" (53:43).

Given that both laughter and weeping derive from God, we can ask if they pertain to the divine Reality itself, or if God brings them into existence only in created things. We have seen that the ḥadīth literature offers examples of God's laughter, but nowhere does Islamic literature, so far as I know, suggest that God weeps. There is a definite disproportion between laughter and weeping. The first is a divine attribute, the second is not; both are attributes of creatures. As creaturely attributes, neither of the two is good in itself, but, by and large, weeping is praised and laughter is blamed. In the few Qur'ānic mentions, laughter in this world is ascribed to the unbelievers, and laughter in the next world to the folk of paradise.

Given that God laughs and is the cause of laughter and weeping, we might derive three divine names, though they are not mentioned in the standard lists: He who Laughs, the Bestower of Laughter, and the Bestower of Weeping.[27] These partake of the same structural relationship as three names commonly mentioned by the theologians: the Living (*al-ḥayy*), the Life-giver (*al-muḥyī*), and the Death-giver (*al-mumīt*). God is the Living who never dies, but all things in the universe are constantly shifting mixtures of life and death.[28] So also, it would seem, God is the laugher who never weeps, but all things in the universe are mixtures of laughter and weeping. In the same way, God is the light of the heavens and the earth (Qur'ān 24:35) and "He made the darknesses and the light" (6:1). The Qur'ān is then "A Book We have sent down to bring the people forth from the darknesses to the light" (14:1), that is, from death to life, from ignorance to knowledge, from tears to laughter. Only in joining with God can death, sadness, and suffering be overcome.

If the tradition suggests that weeping is more appropriate for the soul than laughter, this is because human beings are by definition separate from God and immersed in death and darkness. It is true that God created Adam in his own image and "taught him all the names" (Qur'ān 2:31), but this is simply to say that God has a special regard for human beings, not that happiness is guaranteed. Weeping appears as the natural response to human awareness of distance from the Creator, who is the source of all being, good, consciousness, and joy.

Ibn al-'Arabā explains that people are divided into two basic sorts, as suggested by Qur'ān 11:105, which tells us that in the next world they will be either wretched (*shaqī*) or felicitous (*sa'īd*). "In this world, the attributes that the wretched will have in the afterworld appear in the felicitous—that is, grief, affliction, weeping, abasement, and submissiveness." As for the attributes that the felicitous will have in paradise, such as happiness and joy, they appear now in those who will end up as wretched.[29]

One might object that weeping may stem not only from grief and suffering but also from mercy and compassion, as indicated in various ḥadīths. If God sent Muḥammad as "a mercy to the worlds" (21:107) and God is "the most merciful of the merciful" whose "mercy embraces all things" (7:156), surely he should weep in sympathy for the suffering of his creatures. But Islamic theology stresses the divine qualities of the human rather than the human qualities of the divine. As Muḥammad (and other prophets) are instructed to say in the Qur'ān, "I am but mortal like you" (14:11, 18:110). It is true that Muḥammad manifests the divine attribute of mercy, but God does not display the all-too-human weakness of tears.



Moreover, to suggest that God weeps would be to give too much credit to the human standpoint relative to the timeless, God's-eye view of things. God creates the universe out of mercy, love, and wisdom. The inscription on his Throne, upon which the "All-merciful" is sitting (Qur'ān 20:5), reads, "My mercy takes precedence over My wrath." The disproportion between mercy and wrath does not allow God to weep—not even in the anthropomorphic imagery employed by much of the ḥadīth literature—for God sees that in fact all is well. Thus Ibn al-'Arabī cites a ḥadīth that tells us God will take "the two handfuls"—the blessed and the damned, the felicitous and the wretched—and cast one handful into paradise and the other into hell, each time saying, "I do not care" (*lā ubālī*). Why should God not care, given that he is throwing a vast group of people into pain and suffering? Because, Ibn al-'Arabī tells us, his mercy embraces all things, even those who end up in the deepest pit of the Fire. "The final issue of both [handfuls] will be at mercy, and that is why He does not care."[30]

## Kashf al-asrār

Any attempt at a serious review of the role of weeping in Islamic literature would demand a major monograph. Sufi poetry alone provides countless examples. Let me instead provide a few samples of typical discussions from one seminal work, *Kashf al-asrār wa 'uddat al-abrār* (The unveiling of the secrets and the provision of the pious) by Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī. Completed in the year 1126, it is one of the longest and most popular commentaries on the Qur'ān in the Persian language. Maybudī divides his explanation of verses into three stages: literal Persian translation, detailed exposition of the diverse opinions of the early authorities, and "allusions" (*ishārāt*) to the inner meanings of the text. The third stage, in contrast to the first two, offers some of the most beautiful prose passages in the Persian language. The book provides a foretaste of the imagery that would soon come to predominate in the poetical traditions of the Persian, Turkish, and Indic languages, traditions that became the major vehicles for the Qur'ānic worldview in the vast majority of the Islamic world.

Maybudī well understands that weeping may have a variety of causes. He suggests some of them in his remarks on the verse, "They fall down on their faces weeping" (17:109):

Weeping is the state of the beginners and the attribute of the travelers—each person according to his own state and every traveler in the measure of his own activity. The repenter looks upon his own sin and weeps in fear of punishment. The obedient person looks upon his own defective obedience and weeps in fear of falling short. The worshiper weeps in fear of the outcome: "What will be done with me tomorrow?" The knower looks at the beginningless precedent and weeps: "What was done to me and decreed for me in eternity without beginning?" All this happens in the path of the travelers and is a sign of the weakness of their state. As for those who have been stolen away from themselves and achieved stability, for them weeping is an imperfection and a defect in their path. Thus it is related that Junayd was sitting with his wife and Shiblī entered. His wife wanted to cover herself, but Junayd said to her, "Shiblī is not aware of you, so sit." Junayd kept speaking to her, and then Shiblī wept. When Shiblī began to weep, Junayd said to his wife, "Cover yourself, for Shiblī has come back from absence to awareness."[31]

Like others, Maybudī sees both laughter and weeping as appropriate signs of sanctity. He explains this in the context of 2:180, which instructs believers to prepare last wills and testaments. The rich leave behind their property, but the poor in spirit leave behind their stations, among which are laughter and weeping.

The disobedient person fears for himself because of his bad deeds, but the knower fears for himself ten times as much because of the sincerity of his deeds and the limpidness of his states. There is, however, a difference between the two: The disobedient person fears the outcome and is afraid of punishment, but the knower fears God's majesty and manifestation. The fear of the knower is called "awe," and the fear of the disobedient is called "fright." . . .

Awe is a fear that puts no veil before supplication, no blindfold over perspicacity, and no wall before hope. It is a fear that melts and kills. As long as the awestruck person does not hear the call, "Do not fear and do not grieve" [Qur'ān 41:30], he does not relax. . . .

Bishr Ḥāfī began weeping and wailing when he was near death. They said, "O Bishr, is it that you love life and you dislike death?"

He said, "No, but stepping forth to God is hard." . . .

There is another group who come forward to the disclosure of God's beauty and gentleness at the time of going. The lightning of intimacy flashes and the fire of yearning flames up. . . . Makḥūl Shāmī was a manly man, unique in his era, and overcome by the pain and grief of this tale. He never laughed. During his dying illness a group came to see him and he was laughing. They said, "O Shaykh! You were always full of grief. Right now, grief is even more fitting for you. Why are you laughing?"

He said, "Why should I not laugh? The sun of separation has reached the top of the wall, and the day for which I have been waiting has arrived. The doors of heaven are open and the angels are clearing the way: 'Makḥūl is coming to the Presence!'"[32]



In commenting on 2:238, which commands people to be watchful over their daily prayers, Maybudī provides a long mythic disquisition that ascribes the origin of each of the five prayers to one of the prophets. He tells us that Adam, the first human being and the first prophet, was also the first to perform the morning prayer, in gratitude for the passing of night.

When he came from heaven to earth, it was the end of the day. As long as he saw the brightness of the day, he had a bit of ease, but when the sun was concealed, Adam's heart became a mine of grief. . . . He had never seen night, nor had he suffered darkness and grief. Suddenly he saw the darkness that reaches the whole world, and he was a stranger, ill, and separate from his wife. In that darkness he sometimes sighed, sometimes turned his face toward the moon, sometimes whispered silently to the Threshold. . . .

The first of all strangers was Adam, the forerunner of all those who grieve was Adam, the father of all the weepers was Adam. It was Adam who laid the foundation of love in the world and Adam who set down the custom of night vigils. He established the tradition of moaning in the pain of separation and crying in the middle of the night. . . .

At last, when the breeze of dawn began to breathe like a lover and when the army of morning burst forth from its ambush and clamored against the darkness of night, Gabriel came with the good news: "O Adam! Morning has come, peace has come! Light has come, joy has come! Brightness has come, familiarity has come! Arise, O Adam, and recite two cycles of prayer in this state—one in gratitude for the passing of the night of separation and distance, one in gratitude for the morning breath of good fortune and union."[33]

Maybudī typically associates weeping with the fire of love and the burning of the heart. In commenting on 2:247, "God is the friend of those who have faith," he begins by explaining why God is kinder and gentler to the weak than to the strong, and he cites the saying of God, related by the Prophet, "I am with those whose hearts are broken for Me." Then he provides various tales to illustrate the point:

It has been reported that on the Day of Resurrection, one of the broken and burnt will be taken to the Presence. God will say, "My servant, what do you have?"

He will say, "Two empty hands, a heart full of pain, and a spirit troubled and bewildered by the waves of grief and woe."

He will say, "Go right ahead into the house of My friends, for I love the broken and grieving." . . .

David said, "O God, I take it that I must wash my limbs with water to purify them of defilement. With what shall I wash my heart so that it may be purified of other than You?"

The command came, "O David! Wash the heart with the water of regret and grief so that you may reach the greatest purification."

He said, "O God, where can I find this grief?"

He said, "We Ourselves will send the grief. The stipulation is that you stick to those who are grieving and broken."

He said, "O God, what is their mark?"

He said, "They wait all day for the sun to go down and for the curtain of night to descend. Then they begin to knock on the door of the cell of 'We are nearer to him than the jugular vein' [50:16]. Burning, weeping, and sighing all night, full of neediness and melting, their heads placed on the ground, they call on Us with longing voice: 'O Lord, O Lord!' . . .

"From the All-compeller the call comes, 'O Gabriel and Michael! Leave aside the murmur of glorification, for I hear the sound of someone burning. Although he has the load of disobedience, in his heart he has the tree of faith. He was kneaded with the water and clay of love for Me.'

"From the day they came into existence until the day of resurrection, the proximate angels have placed their hands on the belt of serving Me. They observe My every command and burn in hope for one glance. But then they put the fingers of longing in the mouth of bewilderment—'What is this? We do the service, and the love goes there! We do the running and rushing, and they have the arrival and seeing!'

"The Exaltation of Unity answers them with the description of esteem: 'This work is done by burning and grief, and they are the mine of burning and the quarry of grief.'"

Without the perfection of pain and burning,
don't mention the name "religion."
Without the beauty of desire for union,
never lean upon faith.
On the day of arrival, sacrifice
your wretched, bleeding heart
only to the spirit-catching, curling tresses
of the Beloved.[34]



## Notes

1. Ibn Māja, Iqāma 176. Ḥadīths are cited following the numbering system of J. Wensinck, J. P. Mensing, and J. Brugman, *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1936–1969).
2. Muslim, Īmān 346.
3. Nasā'ī, Janā'iz 101.
4. Bukhārī, Janā'iz 43; Muslim, Faḍā'il 62. Another ḥadīth says, "We were with God's Messenger at a funeral. He sat at the edge of the grave and wept until the earth became wet. Then he said, 'My brothers, prepare for the likes of this!'" (Ibn Māja, Zuhd 19). The general tenor of the ḥadīths, however, is critical of ostentatious weeping and wailing as a sign of mourning, partly because this seems to have been the rule among women in the pre-Islamic period. The juridical literature strongly discourages it, and preachers criticize excessive grief as a sign of disbelief in the divine mercy. For a good selection of ḥadīths on weeping for the dead, see Tabrizi, *Mishkat al-masabih*, trans. James Robson (Lahore: Sh. Muḥammad Ashraf, 1963–65), 360–68.
5. Ibn Māja, Zuhd 35.
6. Bukhārī, Ṣalāt 86.
7. So says Fritz Meier in his excellent survey of the literature that ascribes weeping to early Muslims, s.v. "*bakkā'*," in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, new ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960-), 1:959–61.
8. Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī, *Kashf al-asrār wa 'uddat al-abrār*, ed. 'A. A. Ḥikmat (10 vols., Tehran: Dānishgāh, 1331–39/1952–60), 1:239.
9. On the role that complementary attributes play throughout the tradition, see Sachiko Murata's detailed study, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).
10. Bukhārī, Ṣalāt 1; Muslim, Īmān 263. See also Tabrizi, *Mishkat al-masabih*, 1269.
11. This saying is frequently cited and is found in most of the standard ḥadīth collections.
12. Ibn Māja, Zuhd 19.
13. Aḥmad 4:11.
14. Muslim, Īmān 310. Compare Bukhārī, Ṣalāt 129; Tawḥīd 24.
15. Muslim, Īmān 316.
16. The text is from the important Qur'ān commentary *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr* (The realities of exegesis) by Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 1021). Cited in P. Nwyia, *Trois oeuvres inédites de Mystiques musulmanes* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1973), 48.
17. *Kitāb al-luma'*, ed. R. A. Nicholson (Leiden: Brill, 1914), 229.
18. *Mashrab al-arwāḥ*, ed. N. M. Hoca (Istanbul: Edebiyat Fakültesi Matbaası, 1974), 285. For the five passages on weeping, see pp. 110, 241, 265, 280, 285.
19. *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (Cairo: Dār al-Hādī, 1992), 4:242.
20. Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 4:243*.
21. Bukhārī, Imān 13; cf. Muslim, Ṣiyām 74.
22. Ibn al-'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (Cairo, 1911), 3:50–51.
23. Ibid., 1:511.
24. Ibid., 3:539.

25. Ibid., 1:356.
26. Ibid., 2:187.
27. There were diverse criteria by which theologians decided which divine names should be included in their discussions, and by no means did they necessarily adhere to the notion that God has "ninety-nine" names. If the three suggested names are not listed, this is no doubt because they lack a certain majesty. In a similar way, the theologians exclude some divine names that are mentioned explicitly by the Qur'ān, such as "Best of Deceivers" (Qur'ān 3:54, 8:30).
28. To the objection that much of the universe is inert and lifeless, a Sufilike Ibn ʿArabī replies with metaphysical, theological, cosmological, and scriptural arguments to show that life and consciousness are the source of all things and are found everywhere.
29. Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 2:211.
30. Ibid., 3:463. Ibn al-ʿArabī devotes a great deal of attention to the issue of the ultimate happiness of all creatures. For a review of some of his arguments, see William Chittick, "Ibn al-ʿArabī's Hermeneutics of Mercy," in *Mysticism and Sacred Scripture*, ed. Stephen Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 153–68.
31. Maybudī, *Kashf*, 5:637.
32. Ibid., 1:480–81.
33. Ibid., 1:653–54.
34. Ibid., 1:709–10.

# "No Power of Speech Remains":

## Tears and Transformation in South Asian *Majlis* Poetry

**Amy Bard**

### Introduction

In this essay, I explore ritual weeping as a transformative process and address specifically how crying can concretize feelings and align multiple perspectives and complex emotional claims. I frame tears within ritualists' experience of poetry in today's South Asian Shīʿī Muslim *majlis* (the "mourning assembly"). *Majlis* genres and their performance context incorporate several themes explored by other contributors to this volume: the cosmic exchange of water; tears as an efficacious performance, often inextricably bound to poetic lament; and the notion of tears as a doorway between realms.

The *majlis* customs and rituals of Urdū-speaking Muslims are embedded in a variety of regional, religious, and political traditions; more complexity colors their "emotional contour" than a focus on weeping alone might suggest.[1] Yet weeping for Imām Ḥusain, martyred in 680 C.E., is arguably the act that defines the participant in the assembly, the mourner. Shīʿī traditions recount how Ḥusain, the Prophet Muḥammad's grandson, and his family were tortured at Karbalā (in present-day Iraq) by the forces of Yazīd of the Ummayad clan. Yazīd was one of a series of leaders who claimed the Islamic caliphate and in so doing displaced the Prophet's son-in-law, ʿAlī, and his progeny after him. Yazīd's massive army slew Ḥusain's small but valiant party of warriors, first depriving them of all access to water, and took the women of the *imām*'s household captive after the massacre.

*Majlis* poetry about this tragedy depicts tears as the only water in a desert where children are perishing of thirst; as a substance mixed with henna powder to anoint a soon-to-be-widowed bride; as the sun in a weeping cosmos; and as a realm of grief beyond words. As those present in the *majlis* respond to images of suffering and crying in recited poetry, it becomes evident that the economy of the mourning assembly produces, invests, and recycles tears.

The *majlis* raises insistent questions about the aesthetics and purposefulness of ritual weeping and about the assessment of tears. To what extent are ritual tears "instrumental" and to what extent "expressive" of inner states?[2] Gary

# HOLY TEARS

## WEEPING IN THE RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION

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